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Interview with Myldred Smith

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Myldred M. Hays Smith

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CHAPTER II

MYLDRED'S MEMORIES OF PLEASANT VALLEY SCHOOL

Myldred began teaching at Pleasant Valley School in September, 1932. She was 19 years old and fresh out of high school. The county had conducted a 4 week institute for the teachers, but other than that, she had received no specific training to teach. Myldred had decided during her senior year in high school that she wanted to be a teacher. In January, 1932 she traveled from her home in Oakley, Kansas to Hays to take the thirteen tests that had to be passed in order to receive a second grade certificate, which allowed her to teach for two years. She did some substituting in the Oakley school the rest of her senior year in high school.

Myldred's mother had made arrangements for her to live with a family in the Pleasant Valley community. The family provided a horse for Myldred to ride, and she was to take one of her first grade students to school with her on the horse. The first day of school found her scared to death. She put the horse in the barn, took the little girl by the hand, said a prayer, unlocked the door, and walked in. That was the beginning of her teaching career, which lasted until 1949, seventeen years later. Myldred only taught in the Pleasant Valley

school for three years, but has some very fond memories of that time.

Because Myldred was only 19 years old, she had some students that were only five years younger than she was. She would have had a young man of 16, but the school board members refused to let him return to school that year because he was a trouble-maker.

Myldred's responsibilities at Pleasant Valley included teaching 21 students in the one room, putting up and taking down the flag everyday, pumping the water to fill the water pail that was the drinking water for the day, wash the tin cup and place it beside the pail (everyone drank from the same tin cup). She swept the floor when it was dirty, cleaned the windows, checked the outdoor privies, prepared the materials for the day (didn't have duplicators or copiers in those days), carried in the coal and started the fire in cold weather, and at 9:00 each morning, she rang the school bell which summoned the students in to the classroom.

A typical day began with the students and teacher saying The Pledge of Allegiance and then joining in The Lord's Prayer. Sometimes they would sing a song in their opening exercises. At 9:10 they would begin their arithmetic lessons. While one class was presented

with the lesson, the other students would work quietly at their seats. The eighth graders were instructed in Civics at 10:15 and History at 10:55. The rest of the morning was spent with various reading levels.

Lunch was from 12:00 to 1:00. All of the children brought their lunch in either a pail or a sack, and they would eat lunch together. On nice days they would eat outside, and each student was responsible for cleaning up after himself so no trash was left on the school yard.

Classes reconvened at 1:00 when English lessons were presented. The 7th and 8th graders studied Agriculture at 2:05 and all students participated in the penmanship lesson at 2:15. Fourth, fifth, and seventh graders had geography from 2:45 until 3:20 when all students participated in phonics and spelling. Art lessons were given one Friday a month from last recess to 4:00 in order to give the students time to complete their projects. All of the art work was displayed in the room, which meant that in order to hang it all up, some had to be put around the ceiling.

School was dismissed at 4:00 but the teacher still had many things to do. Sometimes a few students would stay in order to clean off the blackboard. Myldred would take down the flag, put things away, empty the water bucket, and in cold weather she would either bank

or put out the fire. There were papers to grade and materials to prepare for the next day, and then ride the horse home.

Teaching methods were often trial and error since this was her first year to teach and she had not had a methods class. Myldred's three older sisters were all teachers in one-room schoolhouses though, and offered helpful advice. Myldred often wished she had had more education before she began teaching, but because her teaching methods included lots of love the students loved her in return and she never had discipline problems.

Myldred said she never had a "pet". She felt that in order to be a good teacher she should love them all equally and not show favoritism. She felt that she was a strict teacher but instilled confidence in her students.

Myldred remembered one occasion when a student's mother came to the school and accused her of pulling the hair out of the son's head. She had a box of hair with her that her son had shown her in order to prove that the teacher had indeed yanked the hair from his head. The next morning, when talking to the class, one of the other students stood up and said the boy had sat there for weeks combing the hair and putting the hair in the box that had come out with the comb. The boy, his mother, and sibling had not been in the area very

long, and soon moved on, as they did quite often.

All text books were chosen and printed by the state of Kansas. Teachers did not get to choose any of the textbooks they taught from. The readers used at that time were The Bobbs-Merrill Readers, which included a primer for beginning readers and a reader for each grade through 8th grade. Students were required to purchase their own books.

Pleasant Valley did not have much of a library of its own, so Myldred supplied most of the books for it. The students were not allowed to take the books from the classroom because there were so few books, but they could be read during free time. Myldred, as did some other teachers, furnished the art supplies for the children. This was depression time, and money was scarce, so the schoolboard only supplied the bare essentials. Dictionaries were donated by parents if they were needed by the younger children. The school had a large dictionary in the library, but it was much too large for the smaller children to use.

Teaching aids included textbooks, of course, use of maps, charts, the globe, and dictionary. A favorite magazine used by many teachers was The National Geographic, which was loved by both teachers and students. Each child had his own desk, with the younger students seated toward

the front and the oldest ones in back. There were two double desks on either side at the back of the room which were used when an older student helped a younger student. Flash cards were used for word study and for math facts. On Friday's they often had math games with 3 students working math problems at the chalkboard, seeing who could work it correctly and be the fastest. Candy treats for the winners often added incentive for the students. Spelling bees were popular at this time and students who wanted to could enter. Iola Litton won the county spelling bee Myldred's first year at Pleasant Valley School. The school board closed the school for two days so Myldred could accompany Iola and another student to Topeka for the state contest, in which Iola took fifth place.

Myldred remembered Iola as an outstanding student, as was Bernice Scott. She expressed a disappointment that she had not been able to keep track of her students so she could have known what professions they had chosen. She knew that Jim Losey and Ottis Burris had gone into farming, but knew nothing of what had happened to the others. During the war she had corresponded with some of the boys but had lost contact after that.

Of the 21 students at Pleasant Valley Myldred's three years there, she remembered that all eight grades

were not represented. Her first year there she had three first graders, two third graders, three fourth graders, eight fifth graders, two seventh graders, and three eighth graders, so there were no second or sixth graders. The only new student during her three years there was the boy that had accused her of pulling his hair out, and he wasn't there very long. So each year, there were two grades that she didn't have students in; second and sixth her first year, third and seventh her second year, and fourth and eighth her third year. This was a farming community and all of her students were from farm families.

Money was tight, and there wasn't always enough food to eat, and Myldred remembered that she had gone without lunch two days in a row at one time because the family she was staying with did not have enough food for lunch. The family's daughter (one of Myldred's students) had also had to go without lunch for the two days. On the third day they again went to school without a lunch to take, but the girl's brother brought them sandwiches in time for lunch.

Even though times were hard, she remembers that the students were always neat and clean. The boys wore overalls and usually a colored shirt, and the girls always wore dresses. The girls wore heavy, long stockings

in the winter to keep their legs warm. Some of the girls wore pinafores over their dresses in order to keep their dresses clean. The teacher, of course, always wore a dress.

Teachers were expected to always present themselves as ladies (or gentlemen, as the case may be), and they, in turn, expected the students to be ladies and gentlemen. Myldred found time to teach her students "beyond the textbook"; she taught them manners and etiquette. She taught them to help each other, to work together, and to play together.

The school board members set high expectations for the teachers. Women teachers could not marry. Teachers were not to smoke or drink, and were not to date during the week. There were five or six young men in the Pleasant Valley community that took turns taking Myldred to the various box suppers. The girls prepared the meal and put it in a decorated box, to be shared with the male that bid the highest price for it. Evidently the girl whose box went for the most money was declared the most popular girl. These five or six young men that dated Myldred decided that she should be the most popular girl at all the box suppers for the year, and they saw to it that she was always nominated and that her box went for the highest bid. The next year

when the event was to be held at Pleasant Valley, she wasn't even nominated. That was fine with her, though, because one of her eighth grade girls won the honor, which made Myldred very happy.

The school board members did all of the hiring and firing for the school. It was their responsibility to know the background of the prospective teachers in order to provide a quality education for their children. The school board members at Pleasant Valley during the time Myldred was there were Walter Litton, William Roemer, and Frank Scott, all of rural Grinnell. Myldred does not remember being evaluated by the school board. They knew her family and her background, so had faith that she would do a good job, and since there were no complaints by the students or parents, they felt confident that they had hired a competent teacher. Myldred always tried to live up to and surpass their expectations.

Myldred recalled that she taught at Pleasant Valley during the dust storms of the 1930's. She said a joke of the time was that it was said the red soil from Oklahoma would blow in one day and blow back the next day, mixed with the black dirt of Western Kansas. The school did not have a custodian, so it was her job to clean the school after each dust storm, and since they

didn't have vacuum sweepers yet, everything had to be done by hand. When the dust storms started to blow in, the children were sent home before the storm got too bad. She recalled one dust storm coming in, however, before all the children had gotten home, so she remained at the school with them. Mr. Scott, the man of the house where she was living, brought his horse and came to take them home. They covered their faces with handkerchiefs, Myldred took hold of the horses' tail and the little girl's hand, who took hold of the boy's hand, and he took hold of Mr. Scott's hand, who brought up the rear. The horse led them home. The dust was blowing so bad they couldn't see, and they at no time knew where they were, but somehow the horse knew the way and got them home safely.

Myldred remembers the inside of the school room to be kind of rectangular. There were windows on the north, a slate blackboard on the front wall, and wooden desks for the students and teacher. The room was heated by a pot-bellied coal stove, in which she had to build the fires. The lighting was provided by the light coming in the windows and a few electric lights. Water was pumped from the well that was fed by a natural spring. The toilets were outside privies, one for the boys and one for the girls. The drinking water was kept at the

back of the room, in a little cove or screened area.

Children began school around six years of age. Children that were five were allowed to attend school if their mother was the provider for the family and needed to work outside the home. Most students started school in the first grade and stayed in until high school graduation. The parents saw the value in education, and kept their children in school. Occasionally there were students that dropped out, they often were causing trouble because they didn't want to be there. The school board would not put up with troublemakers, and would ask them to leave school.

The farthest any of the students that attended Pleasant Valley School lived from the school was three and a half miles, and the children of that family came to school in a horse-drawn buggy. There were five children in that family and the oldest were responsible for taking care of the horse and buggy. Other students rode horses to school, or walked, although the students in one family were driven to school in a car.

Some of the special programs and activities that took place were plays, Christmas Pageants, spelling bees, box suppers, and baseball games. Other schools in the area would come to Pleasant Valley to play baseball because the baseball diamond there was the best in the

area. Myldred remembered one occasion when her sister's school had come to play baseball. Myldred had allowed a boy to play on their team that wasn't in school at the time, because the students wanted to let him play. Myldred was about to catch a ball that would allow her school's team to win. Because the boy she had allowed to play was such a good player, she didn't feel it was right for their team to win, so she intentionally missed the ball, allowing the teams to tie, and everyone seemed happy about that.

Art and music were added to the curriculum because Myldred felt they were an important part of a well-rounded education. She taught art-history, and still has the book she used. The book, World Famous Pictures came with larger copies of some famous paintings. The children were expected to learn the name of the painting and who the artist was. Some of the pictures included: Boy with Rabbit by Sir Henry Raeburn, The Blue Boy by Thomas Gainsborough, The Holy Night by Antonio Allegri Correggio, Joan of Arc by Jules Bastien Lepage, and The Lord's Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci, to name just a few. During music the younger students often got to choose the songs, so "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" was sang quite often.

To add interest, a different quotation was written

on the chalkboard each day. Sometimes Myldred would write the quotation on the board, sometimes one of the students would write one. The quotations were taken from a book called A Quotation a Day which was compiled by Bill E. McArthur.

Some of the quotations:

To see what is good and not do it
is want of courage.

When wealth is lost, nothing is lost.

When health is lost, something is lost.

When character is lost, everything is lost.

Be prompt in all things.

Take care of the minutes, and the hours
will take care of themselves.

Teacher-made examinations were given in April of each year and used to promote students to the next grade. Eighth graders were required to take a state examination to determine if they were to be promoted to high school. The tests were given in different towns each year, and the students had to provide their own transportation. Different teachers were chosen to give the tests. One year Myldred was chosen to give the test, which was to be at Orion, Kansas. Most of the students were able to finish the test and be gone by 4 or 5:00. One of the

boys was having difficulty coming up with the answer to one of the questions and he was still trying to think of the answer at 8:30 or 9:00 that evening. He just didn't want to give up, so it was a bit late when Myldred finally got to leave.

Pleasant Valley did not hold a graduation exercise for the students. The teacher usually gave the graduating eighth graders a small gift. Myldred usually gave them a pen and pencil set since it was a small but practical gift. This was during the depression and people didn't have much money, but she wanted to give them something because she was proud of them.

Myldred believes that Pleasant Valley School and its teachers made a lasting contribution to the community by educating the children to grow up to be proud of their parents, proud of their home, and proud of their school. She taught there for three years and enjoyed every minute of it, and loved every child there.